

INSIDER'S *Guide* to Volunteering in Ghana

By Godwin Yidana and Gayle Pescud

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ARE YOU "M.a.D."?

That's G-lish for: Are you "Making a Difference"?

"And what on earth is G-lish?"

Fair question. G-lish is an emerging language that Godwin and Gayle speak in Ghana and "You are invited" to learn it with us! By the way, "you are invited" is what Ghanaians say the moment before they begin eating in another's presence, essentially inviting others to partake in their meal. It's one of our favourite sayings. "G-lish" is *our* meal, so to speak, so dig in and join us. (A note on point-of-view: "I" or "my" refers to (me) Gayle and "we" or "us" refers to both Godwin and Gayle.)

"But, why *G-lish* anyway?"

This is why:



We toyed with "G-squared" and "G+G=3" but we're terrible at maths and good at languages so "G-lish" it was. It just made sense. By now you know that www.g-lish.org is our new virtual home. We're still tweaking it because we're new to Wordpress and, well, we're slow, but the basics are in place. If you want to join us for bigger things, and more of the posts you already enjoy, you can easily subscribe to G-lish by clicking the Subscribe by Email button on

the right-hand side of the main page. You will receive a message in your email in box in which there is a link to confirm your subscription. Just click the link and presto: future posts will pop into your inbox so you don't have to keep coming back to the site. This is Ghana, our old blog (<http://gisforghana.blogspot.com>), will remain where it is because our heads might explode if we have to alter that much at a public internet café while the power and internet connection constantly drops in and out. So new blog posts will only be added to G-lish www.g-lish.org. We will no longer post on This is Ghana. *Tissues please.*

Thank you to the readers of This is Ghana for your helpful words, emails and comments along the way. We never expected blogging to grow. You can see we've already imported our old posts from Blogger to G-lish. That bit was as easy and we'll be writing a post on the transition from Blogger to Wordpress should you be interested in how we did it.

We'll also be adding separate pages about other activities we're involved with. This is why we switched to Wordpress. You can't do it in Blogger—well you can, but we're not technical enough to do it there whereas Wordpress creates the pages for you. We're adding a dedicated page on Making a Difference covering ways you can contribute in various fields from Micro-finance to Climate Change, Conflict, Fair Trade and Education, to name a few. We'll make it simple so you can help from wherever you are. This guide is just the beginning.

We're also finalizing a guide to Ghana. Yes, we've written what we call The Insider's Guide to Ghana—a new way of understanding and experiencing this country chock full with our insider's knowledge, tips and experience. It's a whole new guide book. There is an excerpt at the end of this guide to give you a taste of what to expect. It will be ready soon, but we won't put an exact date on “soon” because our “soons” often become delayed, Ghana being what it is. Let's say it will be about a month from this guide's release. Please sign up to receive blog posts by email if you want to stay in the loop about the Ghana Guide's release.

Right, now we best really get started. And so:

In 2009 Ghana was rated by the Global Peace Index as the second most peaceful nation in Africa (after Botswana).

The real beginning of The Insider's Guide to Volunteering in Ghana

So, you think you want to go M.a.D. eh? You really want to Make a Difference? If the volume of emails we receive on volunteering or finding a reputable programme is an indication, many readers are planning to do just that.

While this guide focuses on volunteering in Ghana, you could reasonably apply this information, and the advice and warnings, to any volunteer programme anywhere, especially in developing countries. Wherever you decide to volunteer, we want to put you in the best position to find a solid programme that meets your needs, and to know what to avoid.

We begin by addressing the question of “What Makes a Good Volunteer?” which is followed by “Key Skills” for successful volunteering. Then we address the perennial question: “But what difference will I make?”

This is followed by how much I spent as a volunteer over eleven months in Ghana broken down by item. I also created a sample, three-month budget based on my eleven month budget. I updated it for cost increases.

Importantly, we have included an extended section on “Cautionary Tales” and “Warning Signs and Solutions” when choosing a volunteer programme. We have been privy to the best and worst (hopefully it doesn't get worse than what we described here) practices and urge you to keep these warnings and advice in mind throughout your journey.

We reviewed several programmes we know to be good and reliable. We are able to recommend them because we either once volunteered with them, worked for them, or spent time with them. We have outlined one excellent online volunteering programme too, in case you wish to do something but commitments prevent you from traveling far from home.

We have given several good web site links to help you in your search to volunteer, travel, make social change and learn about Ghana and Africa. They are by no means exhaustive, but they *are* excellent.

Finally, I included my story because I was one of the least likely people, on the surface of it, to succeed at this. I was a corporate executive living in suburban Sydney. I'd never set foot in a developing country. Following that, *The Journey So Far* is a summary of what I have done since leaving Australia "to volunteer for 6 months" in 2005. And then you have a short excerpt from the Insider's Guide to Ghana. I hope this inspires you to get out and shake things up—wherever you may be.

What Makes a Good Volunteer?

Age, gender, work experience and nationality have nothing to do with volunteer success, or how much people contribute and how well they cope when they travel abroad to a foreign culture to volunteer. As a volunteer myself and, later, manager of volunteers, I never could tell who would adapt and who would run into problems coping. Many times the impressions I formed after the first few days together were proven wrong as time passed. I learnt that some people take a few weeks to warm up and find their stride and I shouldn't be too quick to judge. Indeed, I was one of them. Some begin all optimistic, but become frustrated after a week or two with the pace of things. I worked with several volunteers between the ages of forty and seventy-three who were fine with bucket baths, power cuts, and coping with the weather while a few young folks almost passed out at the thought of bathing from a bucket or hand-washing their own clothes. I worked with some high school graduates from Europe, whose English was minimal, but who put their hand up for anything and achieved much more than some highly skilled professionals who didn't show such willingness. Other professionals, however, were excellent. It was a valuable lesson in human nature.

I learnt that the ones who excelled shared certain key personality or character attributes irrespective of age, gender, background and nationality. The most important and helpful

Ghana has no functional youth policy

attribute was a willingness to do what was needed, not necessarily what you thought was most important or what you wanted to do.

For example, I really wanted to design new products when I first came to volunteer, and it *was* part of my project description, but they *really* needed someone to do market access related work on new export markets. I didn't want to do it, because that was my (boring as far as I was concerned) background, but I did it because no one else could (after one other volunteer left), and they needed it at the time.

I did eventually do design work, after I did all the other stuff first. Priorities and professionalism are just as important in a tiny office in a remote corner of the world as they are in a New York skyscraper.

At school they wanted me to teach Japanese. I spent about \$300 on proper teaching materials and lugged them all the way to Ghana. Within half a day at school I saw that most children struggled with English. Teaching Japanese was pointless. So I developed an English language literacy programme instead, because that's what was needed. I wasn't a literacy expert, but I knew enough about the basics from having studied two other languages in-depth. I ended up loving it though. So, several lessons learnt there too.

We both agree that a good volunteer will find solutions to difficult and unexpected circumstances, not give up when the going gets tough, and understand that everything takes time. You will meet some of the most amazing volunteers from all walks of life. Chances are you're like-minded and will naturally gel with each other. This is one element of volunteering that was completely unexpected—the great friendships. I know that plenty of volunteers I worked with have remained friends, caught up in their home country and even traveled together to other countries since they returned home from Ghana.

As a volunteer I overlapped with about 50 other volunteers over eleven months. And as manager of the programme in Cape Coast for 20 months, I worked with about another 85 volunteers from all over the world. Godwin worked with several different volunteer organisations over the past six years, including both Ghanaian and international volunteers. He also managed various projects as a volunteer himself. Based on this experience, we defined the key attributes of helpful (and unhelpful) volunteers.

But, first, a scenario. The few days before shipments at Global Mamas were very stressful. We needed every available hand. Because we always received a rush of finished items just before the deadline, we needed help with mundane jobs like checking quantities, checking quality, and tagging products over those few days. I asked for help and some volunteers observed the rush and jumped in to help anyway. After the rush everyone returned to their major projects. As a volunteer I spent many a frantic day writing tags or tagging products in preparation for shipments too, in between researching the export and market issues, writing proposals and anything else I was doing. The key here was need, flexibility and willingness.

What I didn't want: People who had a rigid idea of *how things should work*—even if they had only been in country a week (or a day!). People who complained about things like power cuts and water shortages as if we had the power to change that. It's particularly difficult to be in the presence of people who brag about their wealth. An extreme example is a young woman who loudly spoke of her parents paying \$40K a semester for her college fees in earshot of Ghanaians who would never earn that much money their entire lives. And then dealing with the conflict when the same person refused to pay a Ghanaian woman (that we worked with) \$3 for a dress she had made by her. I had worked very hard to cultivate a good relationship with that seamstress, who was prickly by nature, and it was about to crumble because of one volunteer's attitude. She did eventually pay, but it was preceded by a week's worth of loud complaints. You will make a valuable contribution but it's important to remember not to make circumstances more difficult than necessary for your hosts or organisation.

We have determined that the key qualities in a good volunteer are:

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We have determined that the key qualities in a good volunteer are: flexibility, determination, mindfulness of others (especially your hosts), commitment, compassion, being non-judgmental, a positive attitude and patience. Now that you're aware of these, if you don't naturally possess these qualities you can learn and practice them. You don't have to be the most mindful or determined person on earth, but a bit of each will go a long way. You may lose patience at times, but try to see the big picture. Most people around you may never get to leave their village or town, let alone travel abroad. A sense of humour helps too because everything that can go wrong often does and you need to laugh about it.

Some pointers on attitude. You are in someone else's country or work place. Respect their culture, customs and traditions. Respect their circumstances. Be mindful of the fact that they may not be as educated, wealthy or well-traveled as you. Withhold your judgment until you have spent (at least) several weeks getting to know people and places. And keep in mind that you have an unparalleled opportunity to learn—you're as much a student as you may be a teacher. Be professional. Just because it may be a holiday or you're in a less "official" set-up, doesn't mean you have to behave unprofessionally. Your hosts will appreciate your professionalism. And if something upsets you, talk with your volunteer coordinator about it directly.

Overall, personal attributes are more important to good volunteering than skills and experience. If it were a hospital, obviously certain skills would matter. The projects we both worked on, however, were broad enough to accommodate everyone. What mattered most was the right attitude and willingness.

Key Volunteer Skills

Before we get started we must mention this upfront. Please do not make claims about skills you do not possess because it's a big waste of time for all concerned. I received one or two volunteers who claimed to be able to do certain things, like use Access (the software), and I spent many hours working out volunteer project flow and management, only to find that they

couldn't do those very things when they arrived. Do say you are a beginner at something, if you are—that's clear. That's ok. But don't say you can do something you can't. For example, I can't use Photoshop or any digital design software, but I can design perfectly by hand, on paper, with paints, the good old-fashioned way—and that's what I said in my application. Please do the same. Your hosts will be grateful for your honesty. Right. That's the end of our stern words.

And here are some words on the skills that are needed. Basically, any skill will find a home in a volunteer organisation, it's a matter of what you want to do—which is why you should be upfront about what you can do and would like to do, if you're given a choice.

If you've been a **mother** for fifteen years, you have **organizational** and management skills and you're probably highly flexible and patient. Perfect.

If you're a budding or an experienced **writer**, many organisations need help with **PR**, **marketing** and newsletter writing and, these days, **blogging** and other social media activities. Many organisations also regularly write **grant applications** and you could help write and edit these before submitting them.

Every organisation could do with an **IT** person at any level, but especially to improve networks, hard drives, anti-virus settings and internet connectivity.

If you're **artistically inclined**, you will be able to find a craft producing project or a programme that needs some level of design input—even if it's creating a new shop sign or flyer.

Anyone good with **numbers** and **accounting** will find a project, although you might panic when you see the state of project-related financial records.

There are 15 registered psychiatrists in Ghana. Only 6 are in active service. Ghana's population is about 23 million, or slightly bigger than that of Australia.

Marketing experts or **students** always have a home. You take for granted knowing simple things like having visible street signage for your business, but many small business owners don't know this. There are many ways you can help small businesses improve their marketing and promotional efforts.

Doctors are in demand everywhere, for good reason—there are nowhere near enough. Likewise any field of medicine.

And if you're a **psychologist** or **counselor** there is plenty of work in schools and orphanages. Some practices, however, might upset you. For example, in orphanages it's not unusual to see "carers" caning their charges for a transgression like spilling water or, at the other extreme, talking with each other while children are climbing on the backs of chairs and crashing to the floor. Working in most orphanages is one of the toughest volunteer jobs going.

If you're a **teacher**, or even someone with good communication skills, there is endless teaching work, but **English language** or literacy, basic **mathematics** and **health**, are what is needed most. **French** language teachers are also in demand since Ghana is surrounded by Francophone countries. Again, beating and caning students is normal practice in Ghanaian schools. *Schools that don't cane are the exception.* I found my ability to withhold judgment at school difficult. It's very tough watching "teachers" violently beat and cane children as little as two and three for things like not cutting their nails short enough or not reading "correctly", even when the teachers themselves make countless mistakes with basic spelling and arithmetic on the board. I was not warned about this at all before arriving to teach. So, in case your organisation leaves that rather important cultural point out, we're telling you here so you can brace yourself. Teaching at school was way more challenging than any other thing I did in Ghana. If you can handle it, you will brighten the lives of many children.

If you're a **management consultant**, there are sophisticated projects that require your analytical mind to help work out how to improve systems and processes—if that's what you want to do. You might work with local staff to understand how things work now and their

You don't have to have graduated as a development studies major to be able to make a meaningful contribution in a developing country project.

level of skill. Then you might work with them to create something that benefits the organisation and that they can also use after you've left.

If you're **military** (we had a few—and they were excellent volunteers. Actually, forgive me, but I have to include this anecdote. It's worth it. We had a volunteer who completed military duty in Iraq just before coming to Ghana. Most volunteers take a few days to pluck up the courage to venture outside alone, but not this guy. On his very first day he asked where the market was. The minute I explained it to him he walked out alone. I was surprised. He came back a few hours later. I commented that he was brave to go off on his own. He said, "It was fine. I wasn't being shot at." Right. Fair enough. That put things in perspective—another lesson.) Forgive me the digression. That's an example, by the way, of the diversity of people and backgrounds you may encounter. So, as I said, if you're military you can contribute all sorts of skills from strategizing, to designing systems, manuals, organizing and getting stuff done. You can probably build too, and...

If you're a **builder, plumber or carpenter**, virtually every building needs maintenance work and **schools** and **clinics** need to be built. This usually involves producing huge amounts of concrete blocks and managing out-of-work teenaged youths. If you could teach some simple building or carpentry skills, that would go along way too. For example, most window-frames and door-frames are not level. It's a simple thing, but it will help in the long run.

If you **recently graduated** from high school, you can help with any number of things like teaching, helping children in an **orphanage**, **writing**, and photography—if that's your thing. Your age is no barrier to how much you can help out.

If you're an **office administrator** with no developing country experience, you can help out in many different areas like teaching office management, **typing**, **computer training**, improving their systems and processes to become more organized. You can probably teach letter and email writing—this is needed!

What you can and *will* do is contribute your skills and experience to a group who collectively, over time, make a huge difference.

If you're a **lawyer**, there is endless work in **human rights** fields like trafficking, child slavery, domestic violence, and related areas. There are a few legal-aid type organisations, mostly based in Accra, but they are completely over-worked since legal help is prohibitively expensive. Or, you could help a small business operator sort out their legal papers since most people can't afford to get help and don't know how to do it.

Basically, you don't have to have graduated as a development studies major to be able to make a meaningful contribution in a developing country project. You just need a positive attitude, flexibility, determination, patience and a sense of humour. The rest will follow.

But What Difference Will I Make?

The one comment that virtually everyone we worked with made was that they were disappointed with “how little” they achieved and they didn't feel like they made a difference. I said the same thing myself early on.

This is what happens. Your expectations of what you will achieve before leaving home as a volunteer, and what you actually achieve *in country*, are usually different. That is, it takes twice as long (or three or four times) to do anything in most developing countries as it does in a developed country where things work. Most volunteers expect to operate at their home country speed on the ground at their project. Unless you're the World Bank—with air-con offices, back up generators, high speed internet, dedicated vehicles, and highly skilled staff—you can't.

You can't change the world in two weeks or two months—on your own. Even two years is pushing it.

What you can and *will* do is contribute your skills and experience to a group who *collectively, over time, make a huge difference.*

If you view your contribution in isolation, you may think it was negligible. But you're not volunteering in isolation (in most cases), you're part of a group and it's the combined efforts of many hands that make a difference.

It's like the proverbial first step in a journey. If you don't take one, two or ten steps, you won't take a thousand steps. Each volunteer is taking a few steps to advance the cause. Maybe you take 353 steps instead of the 790 you could have taken during the same time at home. But, as a group of people who come and go over time, you're taking thousands of steps together that otherwise would not have been taken *at all*. It's more a tortoise than a hare kind of thing, if you get our meaning. Together, you're leaving a positive footprint in peoples' lives—and these lives will *slowly* improve (all things being well) over time.

Here's a real life example.

Where I worked, we simply could not have progressed without volunteers' collective efforts. For example, one of the programmes I worked on when I returned to work in Ghana needed a lot of attention. But I didn't have the time to fix it myself even though I wanted to and I could have done it; I was working 7 days a week fixing other problems already.

So I asked a current volunteer to standardize the relevant documents and make the system simpler, before even continuing with the core objectives of that project. There were hundreds of documents and they were a mess. Fortunately she was the perfect, details-oriented person we needed. This volunteer made it workable after eight weeks and easier for the next volunteer to get stuck into the essence of that project. Meanwhile, I could also manage it at a glance, rather than working through hundreds of folders.

Now the overall system was working better, we needed to refine the individual components as they were still overly complex and full of jargon. So I explained my vision and asked the next volunteer to do this. She was, miraculously, the right person at the right time for that work too. While doing this, she also carried out the core objectives of the project.

Three others followed, sometimes months apart, and they were, again, the right people to refine that project as needed, at each stage. It was vastly improved by the time I left. Those volunteers probably didn't want to do exactly what they did, and I know they felt they could have done more (they told me), but it was what we needed and, over time, their individual efforts contributed greatly to that programme which was a core part of the organisation. Without any one of them it would have been less advanced. Without the inputs that each person made along the way, we would have been stuck where we were years earlier, and helping fewer women in Ghana.

That made a difference. *They all* made a difference.

The biggest lesson I learnt was that I couldn't make a difference alone. The problems are simply too many and too complex. The other thing I learnt was that volunteers came before me and others would come after me. When I accepted this, I felt much more satisfied (and relieved to know someone would carry on the work). I also made some of the best friendships of my life.

How much I spent as a volunteer

Here is a rough break down of what I spent volunteering for eleven months in Ghana.

Airfare	Sydney-Accra return (Emirates)	1900.00
Health Insurance 6+6 months	World Nomads	450.00
Tropical medical doctor	Injections (Yellow Fever, polio, tetanus, Hep A&B)	300.00
Books, gifts and programme materials (mainly for school)	Various shops—I should have bought them in Ghana	350.00
6 months worth of anti-malarials	Larium (I didn't get the scary side-effects)	110.00
New light summer clothes and shoes	I needed to find summer clothes in winter—should have bought them in Ghana.	150.00
Medicines and vitamins	For IBS	300.00
Volunteer fees	WiP	2185.00
Volunteer fees	Kids WW	400.00
Meals and snacks daily for 11 months	Average 5 C/day = GHC 1650.00 (Now it's more like 10 C/day. The exchange rate then was closer to US\$.90=1 GHC. Now it's US\$0.70=1 GHC.)	1485.00
Transport to/from projects	Average 1.00 C/day = GHC 330.00	297.00
Travel around Ghana	Various weekend trips and two long-distance journeys	1500.00
Entertainment: dancing and drinking	Spots, bars and pubs	600.00
Souvenirs, cloth, beads, dress-making	Various shops	500.00
	TOTAL	10,527.00

I didn't keep perfect records of all my weekend trips, but I know from my bank records that this total is very close (+/- about 5%) of what I spent that year (not including London). As you can see, my major expenses were airfare, volunteer fees, food and travel in Ghana. Most volunteers spend an average of one-three months. If you're coming from the US or UK, your airfare will be less expensive than mine (I hope!). Fees will be less and, of course, food, travel and transport would be too.

I created a budget for a 3 month (or 90 day stay) in Ghana today. You can copy this and play with the numbers to see how you can cut costs.

ITEM	DESCRIPTION	COST IN US\$
Airfare return to US/UK	Estimate—change as needed.	1100
Ghana tourist visa	Single or multiple entry. Approx:	100
Health Insurance 3 months	Estimate	200
Tropical medical doctor	Follow your doctor's advice on which shots to have before leaving. Yellow Fever is compulsory for travel to sub-Saharan Africa.	350
Books, gifts and programme materials (mainly for school)	Buy in Ghana	50
3 months worth of anti-malarials	Depends on the brand, but \$7 a week is a good average	84
New light summer clothes and shoes	Buy in Ghana	100

Extra medicines and vitamins	Standard	100
Volunteer fees	YOUR CHOICE	SET BY YOU
Meals and snacks daily for 3 months – NOTE: Some programmes will provide meals so check if it's included in fees or not.	Average 10 GHC/day x 90 days = 900 (x 0.70 = US\$648). You could do it for as little as 5 GHC but that's pushing it now.	648
Transport to/from projects (this may be covered, depending on your project)	Average 1.50 C/day = GHC 135 (x 0.70 = US\$94.50)	94.50
Travel around Ghana	3 weekend trips or one long journey or a combination of these	300
Entertainment: dancing and drinking	Spots, bars and pubs	250
Souvenirs, cloth, beads, dress-making	Various shops	200
Miscellaneous	Extras (medicines, clothes, snacks.)	150
	TOTAL	\$3726.50

Note, you can reduce your overall costs by cutting out the entertainment and some of the travel. If you can get a cheap airfare deal, that would help too.

Some programmes treat you as a walking cash and favour provider. Other programmes treat you as a human being with something meaningful to offer. **Working out which is which is the challenge we're here to help you with.**

Cautionary Tales

Before you go deciding anything, please take the time to read this so you can go sanely M.a.D. (making a difference)—and not *insanely mad*. We included this because we have witnessed some awful programme practices and we hope our experience guides you so that you can avoid the hassle and emotional and financial stress we and many others endured.

The most contemptible practices relate to the handling of money and volunteers. To set things straight, if you're paying a fee, you are a source of income. This is business. Some programmes treat you as a walking cash and favour provider, to be used however they like. Other programmes treat you as a human being with something meaningful to offer.

Working out which is which is the challenge we're here to help you with.

If there's a problem, you'll notice poor programme management within a week of arriving. The reality on the ground will be vastly different from the impression you had when you signed up—via email, after reading glowing project reports online. They may actually have no projects on the ground. Often, an organisation like this will lend you out to another institution, acting as an agent or placement finder—but you don't know this until you arrive. You may have to create your project from scratch even though you're learning yourself. You may have little or no support at all from the host organisation. Worse, they may attempt to take advantage of your “new” (naïve) outlook and ask any number of favours of you. Since you know no better and you probably have a good heart and just want to help (and they know this), the manager may pay extra special attention to you, take you out for dinner, and he'll start inviting you to his room. We're serious. This is common—we saw it happen a lot where older, male managers were in charge. Sometimes volunteers protested, sometimes they agreed. What you don't know is that he does this with every new arrival, and they may be placed around the region so that he moves from one to another. This is about as bad as it gets.

Transparency is also a huge issue. Money is the reason most small NGOs exist. It is a business. Your programme fees are supposed to support the organisation's activities.

As in the scenario above, you discover that the project you were assigned is not part of the organisation that you signed up with, but with an entirely different organisation, such as a school or hospital. Your contact will tell you that the school gets a percentage of your fees to run your project (say, building a new classroom or teaching a class). In reality, however, the school doesn't get any of your fees—no one will tell you this, though. The school contact won't tell you because your very presence may be enough for them. Chances are they'll ask you for money or goods directly and they will certainly use your presence to attract more students to the school. The reality is that the organisation founder probably pocketed your fees.

Another scenario, especially with schools and orphanages, is that they ask you to bring materials like toys and books. You arrive, hand them over and never see them again. At one orphanage I visited the toys were locked away in a separate building from where the children lived and played. The children were not allowed to touch them. At one school the female principle took home the materials and distributed them to her relatives. At another orphanage the owner sold the toys brought by volunteers and kept the money. You might be sent to a school or hospital, start a project, and run out of funds because no one actually created a budget for it. Worse, they'll expect you to chip in the rest from your own savings. Volunteers have actually been left in this position and, believe it or not, paid the balance.

Regarding money or goods, if something seems dodgy, we urge you to ask how your funds or materials have been allocated. There's no reason why they shouldn't explain how they've spent your money, especially if they make claims about it.

Warning Sign: Fees are more than \$2000 a month. You're probably funding a foreign-based manager and administration, and only a small percentage reaches the project on the ground.

But the worst practice of all is what we mentioned earlier: Male NGO managers or founders using their position to take advantage of foreign female volunteers in the most deplorable manner. For example, a group of volunteers may arrive to work on a specific project for, say, one month. The NGO manager routinely sets up such projects so that someone in each of these groups becomes his temporary “girl friend”.

Some volunteers may volunteer as part of their university studies and receive credit towards their studies. We know of one manager who used his position to threaten students with a poor assessment if they didn't do as he requested, which included thinly veiled requests for sexual favours—sometimes they were granted but it became ugly when they protested.

Another programme sends volunteers to remote and city-based projects for short or long-term placements. Management at this organisation has proven to have no interest whatsoever in the welfare of their volunteers. These projects are frequented by Ghanaian male managers and Ghanaian male volunteers who befriend foreign female volunteers as a means of obtaining money, sex and the possibility of a visa in future.

That's the ugly side of the “volunteer industry”. It's all first-hand. Beware, do your homework and take heed of the suggestions following.

Warning signs and solutions

Warning sign: You're a woman and there are no local or foreign females involved in the project—other volunteers don't count.

Solution: Find a project that has at least one female involved in managing you *at your project site*, foreign or Ghanaian. Ask to speak directly with that woman on the phone about the project and the programme set up when you arrive.

**You can live for 6 months on
\$3000 in Ghana.**

Warning sign: You cannot get three positive referrals from other foreign volunteers (they must be foreign to avoid potentially corrupted local—Ghana or whichever country you're looking at—individuals making false statements) who volunteered with them.

Solution: Remember that you're spending *your* time and money *in a foreign country where you may have no support network at all*. If you asked for references and they said no, take that as the biggest warning of all. If they won't give them to you, find another project. **FIND ANOTHER PROJECT!** If they gave you references, contact those people for first-hand accounts so you can make an empowered decision. If you're still not sure, ask for more and even email us if you like. We're pretty connected.

Warning sign: It's all male management, you're a woman, and you're volunteering alone or for college credit.

Solution: Find a programme managed by women so you're less likely to be coerced into a situation you would rather not be in.

Warning sign: You've signed up, but you haven't received any information about pre-departure or what to do on arrival. And you haven't been given any kind of project document.

Solution: Before signing anything, ask them what they will provide. An introduction to the country, the program and a project outline are fundamental.

Warning sign: To “qualify” you must send some expensive item first, such as a lap top, camera, or a sum of money unrelated to the programme.

Solution: Don't even reply to this and find another programme.

Warning sign: They have posted project reports on their site, but when you ask about them, they don't answer the question.

Solution: Scan their reports and names of people who worked on them. Guess what? Sometimes they post fake reports. If it's something for the UN, for example, find the contact at the UN (it should be listed in a report) and email them. Ask if the project really happened.

Solution: Try to find a locally managed and operated programme.

Beware though that sometimes they may be in cahoots with whichever org is shown in a fake report. Try to find as much as you can online. If it's fruitless, find another organisation.

Warning sign: They charge more than \$2000 a month. Chances are you're funding a foreign-based manager and administration, and only a small percentage reaches the project on the ground. The small percentage that reaches your project is probably similar to the total fee you'd pay to a locally based organisation (like Kids Worldwide or Operation Hand in Hand). You can live reasonably for five months on \$2000.

Solution: Find a programme that asks less than US\$1500 a month with a sliding scale that reduces the longer you stay. Anywhere between US\$400-1000 would reasonably pay local staff and an average project's costs. \$1000-1500 would fund a more sophisticated project with a strong track record. We should mention that, regarding the quality of volunteers, in *general* (we know some take their work seriously no matter where they are), those who paid higher than average fees tended to take their project work more seriously. At programmes where fees were quite low, the seriousness or effort sometimes seemed proportionally lower. We noticed that almost all the volunteers in the higher than average fee programmes were high achievers. Their focus was contributing, with some travel on the side. Whereas we noticed the objective of some people in less expensive programmes was to extend their travel time through volunteering cheaply. Some volunteer to travel, others travel to volunteer—each to their own.

Warning sign: Beware of “volunteer factories” that run projects in dozens of countries and, again, charge high fees. We both met volunteers on these projects in our travels around Ghana. Some who paid \$3000 a month were squashed in a room with eight others in Accra with no local support. You can live for about 6 months on \$3000 in Ghana.

Solution: Try to find a locally managed and operated programme within the fee scale mentioned above.

A good indication of a reliable programme is the speed of service you receive upon your initial inquiries. Do you receive a form reply? Do you receive a personalized reply?

Warning sign: The person you correspond with online is not the same as the person you'll be working with on the ground. Or the person you correspond with lives in a completely different country than the one you're going to.

Solution: Call the first contact person on the phone. Ask them directly who your in country project manager is. If they fumble a reply, take that as a warning sign. If they give you the contact, call the person on the ground and ask them where you will work. Ask them if they will work with you. If not, ask them who will. Ask for that person's contact and call them too. If they fumble, then take that as a sign too.

Warning Sign: There are no reports or profiles about past volunteers' work on their project website. Or, they don't actually have a web-site.

Solution: They could be busy, fair enough. But you should ask if they have profiles of what previous volunteers have done. If they don't post updates about past work you should ask whether they actually had any volunteers. And while a web-site is no guarantee that an organisation is well-managed (the negative examples cited here are from organisations that have perfectly good sites), but if they don't have any at all then it's hard to verify anything. Find another programme.

Warning Sign: You call them but no one answers the phone. You call them but the person who answers has no idea what you're talking about. You call them and they promise to get back to you. They get back to you online a week later and ask you to make a payment immediately.

Solution: Forget it. Find a project that treats you with respect and provides good customer service.

Warning Sign: You've read ambivalent reports about the organisation at other forums.

Solution: They may or may not be valid. Inquire directly to the writer and try to find out the truth of the matter. Don't make any plans until you're sure about an organisation.

Reliable Programmes

We realised that the programmes we know as most trustworthy, with a few exceptions, are all run by women. Not saying that men are incapable of running a good volunteer programme, there are a few, but the real life ones from which our warnings are derived were all operated by men.

One good indication of a reliable programme is the speed of service you receive upon your initial inquiries. Do you receive a form reply? Do you receive a personalized reply? Is it within 24-48 hours after you contacted them? Is it a week later? Generally, take speedy and personalized service as a good sign. If you decide to go ahead and volunteer, no matter who they are, call them before making any payment. Taking 5 minutes of your time to do this will save you and all your friends and family a lot of heartache down the track should you make the wrong decision.

A tip. If you want to volunteer in a profession like journalism (one of the most common emails we receive), you can almost guarantee finding an organisation on the ground in Ghana that would welcome your presence, informally, even if they don't run a volunteer programme as such. The media is free and open and there are numerous small and large radio stations (Joy FM in Accra www.myjoyonline.com), newspapers (The Daily Graphic), and television stations (GTV) in Ghana. Try writing to them directly and see if you can set something up. Keep in mind the reasonable fee scales above if they ask for anything. We recommend this as the formal volunteer programmes online relating to journalism charge \$3000 a month.

When to volunteer

For a quieter experience, September—May is best. June—August are the busiest and some programmes become crowded due to students from the northern hemisphere undertaking internships during their summer break, but you still will enjoy this—it just has a different vibe.

Unlike many orphanages, at OHIH you will experience genuine compassion and kindness from all the carers working here. OHIH is really a special place.

A review of good, solid programmes in Ghana

Operation Hand in Hand www.operationhandinhand.nl/engels.htm

Key words: Children, mental health, sustainable travel, orphanage

Operation Hand in Hand (OHIH) is a Dutch-founded NGO based in Nkoranza, near Techiman, in the Brong Ahafo region. This is about 8-10 hours drive from Accra, 3 hours north of Kumasi, and about 5 hours south of Tamale.

OHIH is primarily an orphanage for children and young people with mental and physical handicaps. They provide a rare opportunity for orphans and individuals with mental disabilities who have been ostracized by their communities to live and grow up in a safe and nurturing environment.

Volunteers work together with staff in the day-to-day running of the organisation to care for the children and ensure the project's smooth operation. They state that the minimum volunteering period is three months. We think this is fair given the nature of their work as it would be quite disruptive to the children to have volunteers coming and going too often.

An income generating, bead-making workshop was set up several years ago. Older autistic residents, in particular, learn how to create beaded jewelry which is exported to fair trade shops in The Netherlands—and among the most attractive designs we've seen in Ghana.

Here is an excerpt from their site:

“Our now over 60 mentally or multiply handicapped children need your help at the sheltered workshop, more especially at the newly created Nana Yaw Hall where we work with autistic children, and at the computer-room where there are 5 computers. We need help from volunteers to give all the interested children a turn in either learning, playing or both, with the computer programmes. Furthermore, assistance is needed in the various daycare programmes

and in individual time with our children from the 'special need programme'. These children are daily taken out by 'their volunteer' for a walk, games, cuddling and singing, or just being there and trying to make your presence a non threatening one. There are special speech classes and other activities in mutual agreement with the coordinator.”

They also have a programme where the public who may not be able to come and volunteer can sponsor a child at the orphanage (much the way World Vision operates). You can read more about this on their website.

Unlike many orphanages, in OHIH you will experience genuine compassion and kindness from all the carers working here. OHIH is really a special place.

The closest large town is Techiman, a stopover on the journey between Kumasi and Tamale. It would be a good base from which to explore all of Ghana. The Baobeng Fiema Monkey Sanctuary is a short, share taxi ride from here. And it happens to be set in tranquil, park-like gardens overlooking a lush valley. The only fees they mentioned on their site relate to volunteers paying their room accommodation at the end of each week (4 Cedis per night—about US\$3.00) and their meals and so on. They also have a homestay option in which you pay approximately 100 Euros a month. Email them at albert@operationhandinhand.nl for more details.

Young People We Care www.ypwc.org

Key words: Migration, young people, MDGs, education, training, writing, social media

Of all the projects reviewed here, this is the only one Ghanaian founded and managed, with assistance from international online volunteers through UN Online Volunteers (which is how I initially discovered them—and met Godwin!). The reason we can recommend this is because both Godwin and I work for this organisation and we know you will be treated well and not taken advantage of.

YPWC Week 1	N/A	(US\$1=GHC1.41)
2	\$600	GHC 846
3	\$800	GHC 1,128
4	\$1,000	GHC 1,410
5	\$1,100	GHC 1,551
6	\$1,200	GHC 1,692
7	\$1,300	GHC 1,833
8	\$1,400	GHC 1,974
9	\$1,500	GHC 2,115
10	\$1,600	GHC 2,256
11	\$1,700	GHC 2,397
12	\$1,800	GHC 2,538

YPWC was founded by Michael Boampong, a young man from Kumasi who is currently undertaking NGO management training at the UNDP in Accra, while still co-managing YPWC. Godwin, me and a few others work on proposal writing, developing new projects, budgets, and capacity building training. Godwin also develops the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals) clubs and it is with these that volunteers will assist.

Young people are quite neglected in Ghana—there is not even a national youth policy. YPWC's core mission focuses on migration and youth, and empowering youth to work together to achieve the MDGs. They currently have three volunteers placed in Kumasi, where the organisation is head-quartered, and are in negotiations with a couple of other fairly large organisations to host volunteers in dedicated projects in 2010.

Based in Kumasi (and further across the country as the programme expands), you will work on several key YPWC projects for the MDGs clubs and developing new clubs in conjunction with schools in the area. This could be tree planting, education on environmental issues (cutting down trees for charcoal is common practice in Ghana), leadership training, and conflict management and resolution. If you are specialized in an area related to the MDGs, you can propose a club in that field, such as health or poverty reduction.

In addition to MDGs, they have annual migration programmes to contribute to global migration policy, where young people make inputs. They always need volunteers to help coordinate this annually between late July and early September. This is in partnership with orgs like Global Youth Service Network and Taking IT Global.

Their fees are lower than average as they are not dependent on fees to survive and their programme is in its early stages. YPWC's main objective is working with talented people who can help make a difference to Ghana's youth, help build capacity of YPWC staff, and to keep the connections alive after volunteers return home so they know how their work continues to

impact in Ghana. **Fees include:** Airport pickup and drop off, accommodation in a comfortable homestay setting, and in-country volunteer support.

Village Exchange International www.villageexchangeinternational.org

Key words: reproductive health, sexual health, women, micro-credit, business development, research.

VEI: Duration	VEI Fee	Cedi Equivalent (US\$1=GHC1.41)
Up to 2 Weeks	\$999	GHC 1,408.59
3 Weeks	\$1,158	GHC 1,632.78
4 Weeks	\$1,317	GHC 1,856.97
5 Weeks	\$1,476	GHC 2,081.16
6 Weeks	\$1,635	GHC 2,305.35
7 Weeks	\$1,794	GHC 2,529.54
8 Weeks	\$1,953	GHC 2,753.73
9 Weeks	\$2,112	GHC 2,977.92
10 Weeks	\$2,271	GHC 3,202.11
11 Weeks	\$2,430	GHC 3,426.30
12 Weeks	\$2,589	GHC 3,650.49

VEI is based in Ho, the capital of the Volta Region, on the far eastern side of Ghana. The location is about 1.5 hours south of the Wli waterfalls and 2-3 hours north of Accra.

Established by a very accomplished French woman, this is one of the best-managed, grass-roots and inspiring NGOs in Ghana.

There is a strong trend towards enabling businesses to *better manage their businesses* in developing countries so they can sustain themselves in future. Higher incomes have a marked effect on standards of living, enabling access to health, education and other opportunities that significantly improve quality of life and may not be accessible otherwise.

VEI focus on several distinct areas of work related to empowering women and youth including: Micro-credit/lending and small-enterprise development with a focus on crafts-based businesses in Ho and outlying villages; reproductive and sexual health programmes including educating youth through workshops and performance; scientific research into women's and health issues in the Ho area; and batik products for fair trade export markets. Volunteers here are serious about their project work.

They have excellent volunteer amenities (they provide a delicious, hot, home-cooked lunch each day) and, while their fees are on the high side, they attract a commensurately high caliber of

volunteer. They may have 4-8 international volunteers there at any given time.

If you do choose to volunteer here, you're blessed with some of Ghana's most beautiful landscapes and cultural heritage close by. Wli waterfalls sit on the border between Ghana and Togo in the stunning village of Wli just 1.5 hours north. It is 15 minutes to Kpotoe, a weaving village just outside Ho. Fees include: Housing and food within the VEG compound, transportation to project sites, all project-related costs.

WiP: Duration	GMs Fee	Cedi Equivalent (US\$1=GHC1.41)
1 week	N/A	N/A
2 Weeks	\$1,025	GHC 1,445.25
3 Weeks	\$1,145	GHC 1,614.45
4 Weeks	\$1,275	GHC 1,797.75
5 Weeks	\$1,405	GHC 1,981.05
6 Weeks	\$1,535	GHC 2,164.35
7 Weeks	\$1,665	GHC 2,347.65
8 Weeks	\$1,795	GHC 2,530.95
9 Weeks	\$1,925	GHC 2,714.25
10 Weeks	\$2,055	GHC 2,897.55
11 Weeks	\$2,185	GHC 3,080.85
12 Weeks	\$2,315	GHC 3,264.15

Women in Progress (WiP) www.womeninprogress.org, the volunteer arm of **Global Mamas (GMs)** www.globalmamas.org Key words: Business development, fair trade, export, batik, beads, systems management, finance, project funding.

On par with VEI, but focused on business rather than health, WiP and GMs are fair trade NGOs with a vision to enable Ghanaian women to become economically independent. It was founded by former Peace Corps volunteers who returned, in 2003, to help the women they worked with in Peace Corps access new markets. Now GMs works with over 70 women business owners and craft producers at projects in different parts of Ghana to sustain, manage and grow their businesses. The producers are batikers, seamstresses and bead makers whose products are exported every month to the USA, Europe, and Australia.

One of the major positives is the opportunity to be based in either Cape Coast in the Central Region (cloth production), or Odumase-Krobo in the Eastern Region (bead territory), with a central office in Accra where volunteers can stop over on their travels around Ghana. Accra is very expensive otherwise. There may be opportunities to transfer between the two locations too.

Because of its business orientation, Global Mamas offers business-minded folks an opportunity to put their skills to good use in the developing world. Like many, when I was

first searching online I wondered what on earth my international business experience could do in Africa—a lot, actually.

WiP has numerous opportunities for those with business, accounting, finance, management, graphic design, art, fashion design, writing, photography, teaching and counseling skills.

An accountant or book keeper, or student in this field, may assist in the book keeping training as part of the capacity building programme that every Global Mama participates in. They may help analyse data for the annual report or for the results tracking survey that is undertaken annually. A graphic designer may create new labels for the numerous products in GM's range, help design and layout the annual catalogue, help the clothing production staff layout patterns to maximum advantage, among numerous other things that need to be done.

There is an ongoing fair trade programme that suits anyone who can communicate with people from different cultures. If you volunteer in Cape Coast you're surrounded by some of Africa's most significant and heartrending memorials, including Elmina Castle—the oldest European building in sub-Saharan Africa (dated 1482). The volunteer house is just down the road from this. Like VEI, prices are higher than average but, again, so is the quality of the programme and participants.

Fees include: Airport pickup and drop off, lodging in Ghana, in-country volunteer support and project-related expenses.

Work the World, Ghana www.worktheworld.co.uk

Key words: health, medicine, nursing

WtW: 1 st Week NA	British Pounds	Cedi Equiv: 100 GBP=230 GHCs
2 weeks	1240	2852.00
3 weeks	1340	3082.00
4 weeks	1440	3312.00
5 weeks	1540	3542.00
6 weeks	1640	3772.00
Dental outreach (2 weeks)	1490	3427.00
Dental outreach (3 wks)	1690	3887.00

It's not easy to find short-term medical related placements that you can trust, but this appears to be one of them. Godwin worked on collaborative projects with them some years ago and felt they were worth recommending. If you're a doctor or nurse, while they're slightly on the pricey side, they're highly recommended.

We should mention that medical and nursing practices in Ghana (and much of the developing world) are quite different to many developed countries. We met several volunteer nurses who were shocked at how poorly nurses treated patients. And we once witnessed nurses shouting at a young girl who was having convulsions on a bench in the clinic waiting area to be quiet—they were annoyed with her. We've seen nurses cursing sick patients who needed attention in emergency areas. The concept of bedside manner and compassion for the sick is *almost* non-existent. So, if you do come to work in a clinic or hospital, be prepared to face these kinds of conditions.

Kids World Wide www.kidsworldwide.org

Key words: Orphanage, female education, teaching

KWW 1 st week	\$250	GHC 352.50
2 weeks	\$250	GHC 352.50
3 weeks	\$250	GHC 352.50
4 weeks	\$350	GHC 493.50
8 weeks	\$600	GHC 846.00
12 wks	\$850	GHC 1,198.50

This is where I was supposed to volunteer at the orphanage but ended up teaching at a school in Kumasi. While I don't recommend Christ Our Hope school for now (until they stop beating and abusing their students), I do recommend the girl's orphanage (for female volunteers only) in Accra. It was a little on the quiet side for my liking, but I was impressed with the set up, that the girls went to school, and that they could return to their villages when they grew up after receiving an education.

Volunteers help out at school and in the basic running of the organisation. The orphans living here enjoy interacting with foreigners and learning about other cultures. One advantage is that Kids Worldwide has projects spread across Ghana and the fees are low. You can feasibly volunteer for any period of time you like at any of their projects, and see different parts of the country at the same time.

Online Volunteering

As we mentioned earlier, for whatever reason you may not be in a position to travel and volunteer abroad, but you may still have an aching desire to do something. If so, UN Online Volunteering is excellent programme: www.onlinevolunteering.org/en.html.

As the name suggests, this is operated by the United Nations. The UN vets projects listed in their data base first. YPWC is included in UN Online Volunteering. But there are programmes all over the world and you can check them out to see what best suits your skills and interests and send an application. Most of them require anything from 2-10 hours a week. Here is a list of the skills they're seeking:

- Writing and editing
- Translation
- Research
- IT development
- Coordination and facilitation
- Project development and management
- Design
- Consulting
- Training and coaching

You can choose from the area you are most interested in:

- Education
- Youth
- Income generation and employment
- Development advocacy and strategies
- Integration of marginalized groups
- Health
- Crisis prevention and recovery
- Volunteerism
- Food and agriculture
- Governance and human rights
- Gender
- Culture
- Environment

And you can choose the geographical area you are most interested in helping when you search:

- Global
- Sub-Saharan Africa
- Latin America, Caribbean
- Arab States
- Eastern Europe, CIS

It's a really simple way to get involved—while sitting in your PJs at home in front of a computer.

'Anyone with a hammer and a shovel can start an international NGO, but you'll need more than good intentions to make it work.'

Verge Magazine

www.vergemagazine.com

Excellent weblinks for travel, social change and volunteering web-sites:

Volunteering

Operation Hand in Hand: www.operationhandinhand.nl/engels.htm

Young People We Care: www.ypwc.org

Village Exchange International: www.villageexchangeinternational.org

Women in Progress: www.womeninprogress.org

Global Mamas: www.globalmamas.org

Kids World Wide: www.kidsworldwide.org

Work the World: www.worktheworld.co.uk

UN Online Volunteering: www.onlinevolunteering.org/en.html.

Finding a volunteer project

For the best data-base of volunteer projects on earth see Idealist: www.idealist.org

For another excellent window into volunteering and working abroad see Transitions Abroad: www.transitionsabroad.com

Travel in general

For life and travel in foreign cultures, check Pocket Cultures: www.pocketcultures.com

At Matador Travel www.matadortravel.com click on “Change” for inspiring stories about volunteering, working and community projects. Be warned: Matador is addictive.

Check Lonely Planet's Thorntree forum and country pages www.lonelyplanet.com/ghana for on the ground updates.

For beautifully written articles on social change, development and travel, check Verge Magazine: www.vergemagazine.com

Travel essays and narratives: www.pology.com

Journey Woman for women travelers everywhere: www.journeywoman.com

Fun and general travel stories and narratives: www.worldhum.com

I had been planning to work in England (probably for an oil company) when the tsunami hit on Boxing Day 2004.

Social Change and Media

For socially-oriented commentary by bloggers and new media users from around the world

www.globalvoicesonline.org

Our favourite Africa-related blog—Timbuktu Chronicles: timbuktuchronicles.blogspot.com

Ghana Blogging Group: www.ghanablogging.com

News and Magazines on Africa and Ghana

My Joy Online in Ghana: www.myjoyonline.com

New African Magazine: www.africaasia.com

BBC World Service: www.bbcworldservice.com and their Focus on Africa Magazine:

www.bbcworldservice.com/focus

New African Woman (Gayle hangs out at news stands for this magazine's release):

www.africaasia.com

Gayle's Story

When I decided to volunteer I knew virtually nothing about the developing world. I didn't do development studies or international relations; I majored in Japanese and Korean language and had worked for Japanese corporations for ten years until 2004.

I had been planning to work in England (probably for an oil company) when the tsunami hit on Boxing Day 2004. I worked in the oil and gas industry then for the Japanese Government and had researched gas exploration around the area of earthquake's epicenter that caused the tsunami. Offshore Aceh in Indonesian waters was my backyard, in many ways.

And Boxing Day was, for my family and me, the one day of the year that our thoughts were firmly focused on the ocean already. Dad is a sailor and every year he heads off in an ocean yacht race that begins on the 26th of December. You can check their progress this year by going to www.sailorswithdisabilities.com and clicking through to Sydney to Hobart 2009.

But I was not interested in Africa at all. I knew about oil interests in various countries, and I knew about Mandela, Biko and Tutu, but that was it. I had not even heard of Nkrumah.

News and images of the tsunami began streaming in soon after the race began on Boxing Day 2004. I had a very clear and conscious thought while watching TV that evening that people were drowning so close to home and I was glad Dad was nowhere near there. Dad and his crew made it safely to their destination, but we'd been inundated with footage of the tsunami for days by then.

Sometime between Boxing Day and the 31st a thought crept in to my mind. *I could do something to help.* (Gotta watch those thoughts!) I felt I owed a debt to the region. And that's when I started looking online to volunteer in the aftermath of the disaster.

I have to say, again, that I had no idea about the developing world. I knew nothing of volunteering. I'd never heard of Peace Corps or VSO. (I'm Australian, but *still*.) I searched and searched but I discovered that NGOs were overwhelmed with offers of help from professionals like doctors, builders and nurses. By early New Year their waiting lists were filled for months. I couldn't see how my business skills would help.

So I finally decided to leave tsunami recovery to the experts, but the idea of volunteering somewhere in the developing world stuck. My new year's resolution became: "Volunteer on the way to London." I had no idea, back then, that this whim would take me to three continents, over a dozen countries, for the next five years—and I'd be paid for it (or at least come out even).

So I cast my net wider. I looked at Sri Lanka, since it was also hit, but I couldn't find a suitable project. As much as I loved the idea of caring for orphan elephants, I didn't feel like it was "doing the hard yards," and I had this insane (in retrospect) notion that volunteering was about pain and sacrifice.

My problem was that I had a huge fear of standing in front of a class to teach (quiet voice) and I also have irritable bowels (IBS). I worried that I'd get nervous and want to run to the loo all day.

I started looking for orphanages but there were so many I felt overwhelmed. I was obsessed with belly dancing at the time so I looked towards Egypt and Turkey. But I couldn't find anything and, by then, Africa was coming up in all my searches.

But I was not interested in Africa at all. I knew about oil interests in various countries, and I knew about Mandela, Biko and Tutu, but that was it. I had not even heard of Nkrumah. I didn't know more Nigerians speak English than the English. But, I decided to focus on orphanages in Africa—the whole cliché—another life-changing thought/decision.

It was sometime late January that I found idealist.org which happened to have a database for a search of “business” and “women”. Ten seconds later I discovered Women in Progress. As soon as I read their ad I knew it was right—it was business oriented, for women, and they produced batik textile products (I'd studied textile design for three years after university) and they exported (I'd worked in a Japanese trading company for three years too). So I emailed them and received a swift reply. I made an instant decision to volunteer in Ghana.

But where on earth was Ghana? I didn't even know what or where West Africa was. I remember thinking, *west of what?* I narrowed my searches for orphanages to Ghana and quickly found a reputable organization. That was it: six months in Ghana then off to England.

And then the orphanage coordinator wrote and asked if I would teach Japanese at a primary school instead. My problem was that I had a huge fear of standing in front of a class to teach (quiet voice) and I also have irritable bowels (IBS). I worried that I'd get nervous and want to run to the loo all day. I wanted to say no, but he begged and explained that they had too many volunteers booked at the orphanage already, so I agreed. I never did get to work at an orphanage but I did visit the one I initially was posted to. And I didn't end up teaching Japanese (much anyway), because there was a greater need at the school for literacy teaching. One of the many things I learnt was to do what was needed, not necessarily what I wanted to do.

But I found my feet. Working in this environment satisfied me more than anything ever before—and I was good at it. That ten years of soul-destroying corporate work paid off in its own way—I had skills and knowledge I could adapt in a meaningful way.

Your skills and life experience—so long as you can adapt them to the local context—are invaluable. Anyone interested in this work would serve struggling communities *anywhere* better with solid skills and experience. The know-how you gain from a few years in the best-resourced businesses or organisations like JP Morgan, McKinsey, or any large corporation like Sony or Microsoft (the founder of Room to Read www.roomtoread.org is an ex-Microsoft man) are the very thing developing communities may never have access to. You can bring and transfer your skills where they're most needed. In short, practical skills that meet a need are invaluable.

It took me a month to warm to Ghana and find my feet. After that, I loved it. I finally got to England after eight months in Ghana (I had frequent flyer points from all those oil company meetings) and applied for a job with Traidcraft almost by accident. I interviewed for it while still on that trip and received an offer of work—in Cambodia—after I'd come back to Ghana to finish my volunteering. So I left Ghana after a year for S E Asia. But I then received an offer to return and work for WiP. I was torn. I finally decided to return and work in Ghana for WiP.

Like many who travel to make a difference, I often feel the travel has benefited me more than I've benefited any place. It's a facile, unquantifiable idea, but it certainly seems to have some truth in it. And I found my place where passion meets talent and experience—at last.

I believe that if my ambition upon leaving *had* been to work in Ghana or Cambodia, I would have tried too hard and missed other things going on around me, and it probably wouldn't have happened.

**A lot of mistaken beliefs
have been busted over the
past five years. I urge you
to go bust yours—and help
make a difference.**

I feel that fate played its role at each of the turning points in this journey— some call it “cosmic choreography” (I read that phrase in Caroline Myss’s *Invisible Acts of Power*.) But there was also a fair dose of “opportunity meets preparation.” What I mean is that I was in the right place (by accident), at the right time (unplanned), with the skills needed (accidentally acquired, but acquired nonetheless) and the heart to do it (that was natural).

My second trip to London for a week’s training with TC before heading to Cambodia coincided with the judging of the Top Shop/Tabeisa Design 4 Life comp that I worked on during my final months as a volunteer with WiP. I became a judge by virtue of being in London at the right time. I met Annegret, one of the winners, for the first time in person in late 2008 when she came to Ghana to work on her next season after we’d exported a few orders of her designs to Top Shop, which happened shortly after I returned to work in 2007. There was so much cosmic choreography it was positively *Russian* (ballet—alright, perhaps that’s *streeeeetching* the idea).

If you made it this far, anyway, you have what it takes to volunteer *or work* in the developing world: patience and determination. A sense of humour, especially when it comes to toilets and departure schedules, helps too. We’ll get on to this in more detail further below.

A final word on this journey. In December 2004, if I knew exactly what was in store I would have thought—yeah right. I would have thought I was not mentally or physically strong enough. A lot of mistaken beliefs have been busted over the past five years. I urge you to go bust yours too—wherever it happens—and help make a difference.

As an interesting aside, in 2006 I discovered that the BBC did a story on the phenomenon of post-tsunami volunteering. I read that tens of thousands of people felt compelled to volunteer after the tsunami, often far from where it hit.

As Ghandi said: "Be the change you want to see."

The Journey So Far

This is how my "volunteering for 6 months on the way to England" in July 2005 turned out.

July-November 2005: Volunteer with Women in Progress. Work on market access for EU markets, wrote grant application, helped with computer and typing training, created and co-delivered design workshops for batikers and seamstresses.

November 2005-March 2006: Volunteer with Kids Worldwide. Worked with kids with learning problems like dyslexia and educated the teachers about the detrimental effects of beating or verbally abusing students with learning problems.

March-April 2006: Traveled to London for a month to meet friends. Interviewed for a position in Traidcraft's Market Access team in Newcastle, England (they were impressed with my experience in Ghana, as well as corporate background).

April 2006-July 2006: Finish volunteering at WiP. Worked mostly on Tabeisa's Design 4 Life competition www.design4lifeghana.com and helping to move to new volunteer house: lots of painting. Offered a position in Traidcraft's Phnom Penh office. Accepted it. In London for judging of Design 4 Life comp.

July-2006-May 2007: Working as consultant to Traidcraft on fair trade and crafts production projects in Cambodia, Vietnam and the Philippines. Lived in Phnom Penh Cambodia while travelling regularly to Vietnam and once to Manila to carry out project activities. Got projects up and running and co-delivered numerous workshops on business counseling, market access and product development.

May 2007-January 2009: Returned to work for WiP/Global Mamas in Cape Coast. Continued working for 20 months on all manner of projects related to the running of the organisation and volunteer work.

Individually, we're two of the best-placed people to write a guide book on Ghana. Together, we're even better.

January 2009-Present: Working for YPWC on various start-up projects, writing several books, writing on various forums such as Global Voices, my blog and guest blogging at other travel and development blogs.

In future posts I'll be writing about Godwin's life story. This will inspire you in different ways too. He's one person that lives by his motto: "Only dead people give up." He struggled to overcome the most challenging odds, growing up in abject poverty in a conflict zone, and ultimately graduating from university and volunteering for local NGOs the entire time. You won't believe the experiences he endured to get where he is, but it shows you that anyone can do anything with determination, courage and dedication.

INSIDER'S GUIDE TO GHANA

Following is an excerpt from "Background and Culture" in the **INSIDER'S GUIDE TO GHANA** (IGG). This section of the guide is over 22 pages long (and it's yet to be finalized). The whole guide is more than 150 pages chock full of tips, highlights (similar to that posted on the blog), maps and essential information that you cannot find in any other guide book or in Ghana itself, unless you have connections. **Hint: look out for the section on Visas to know how that process (before and after arriving) really works.** Unlike most guide book authors, one of us is actually Ghanaian. Godwin has lived in Bolgatanga, Bawku, Accra, Cape Coast, Takoradi, Tarkwa and Kumasi, traveled through all ten regions, and speaks six Ghanaian languages fluently. He also has connections across the country. Gayle has lived, worked and volunteered in Cape Coast, Elmina, Kumasi and Bolgatanga for more than 3.5 years and taken more than fifty trips across the country. We're here in Ghana; we don't drop in every three years for eight weeks to madly update a book—and we're not working on six other country guides at the same time. We give Ghana our full attention. Unlike most guide books, however,

An important custom is not to use your left hand for eating, handing over money, shaking another's hand or anything at all when interacting with others.

IGG will be in the form of a downloadable PDF so you can receive it instantly—no waiting for the postman. You can print it or keep it digitally and print the pages you need, as needed. It will be black & white with no pictures except for maps because we know, if you're in Ghana, finding *any* printer with ink is a challenge. You can always check out the photos at G-lish for an overview of people and places. Subscribe by RSS or email on the front page of G-lish.org to stay informed about the release. Soon, we promise.

Meanwhile, here is a short excerpt from the **INSIDER'S GUIDE TO GHANA** relevant to those planning to come and volunteer or travel in Ghana. We'll be posting excerpts on G-lish.org in coming weeks too. We'll also be holding a competition with giveaways when we release the guide.

Etiquette:

Left hand no-no: An important custom is not to use your left hand for eating, handing over money, shaking another's hand or anything at all when interacting with others.

It's considered dirty—the hand you wipe your bottom with. It's the same in many other cultures across the world. However, as a lefty, I have erred. I learnt that Ghanaians will assume I'm unaware of this issue and overlook it, but it's better to try to avoid doing it in the first place.

Don't poop in a urinal. It's unacceptable, even if there are no toilets. If you must do so (and some of us have been pushed to such extremes) make sure no one is around to see. To help you avoid this problem, we have included a comprehensive list of toilets across Ghana by city or town because public toilets are as rare as, well, toilets and often filthy.

No Shoes Inside: You can wear your outside shoes in someone else's home, although some people prefer you not to. However, always take them off before you enter someone's room.

Don't blurt out a question or request for help without stopping to greet people first.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T: Don't blurt out a question or request for help without stopping to greet people first. Also, unless you want to make a bad impression, don't speak in English about Ghanaians or negative aspects of Ghana within earshot of Ghanaians. It's ungracious. We've been at dinners where the majority of people were foreign, with a few Ghanaians, and the foreigners complained, joked about, and criticised Ghana and Ghanaians as if the Ghanaians present were deaf. Likewise, we've experienced this in volunteer work places where volunteers condemned various aspects of Ghana quite loudly, to the extent that we had to quell the emotions of the Ghanaians who overheard these comments. Likewise, I've spoken with taxi drivers who have overheard entire conversations about the organisations they're driving for, or the people that were under discussion or doing the talking, as if it was assumed that taxi drivers can't understand or remember anything said. Remember you're a guest in Ghana. Our advice is that if you feel frustrated, write it in a journal, email it to a friend, or discuss it in private.

The finger: Some Ghanaians know that holding up your middle finger is an insult from watching foreign movies but won't take it as an insult. The Ghanaian equivalent is to hold your hand as a fist, thumb on top, and raise the thumb up and down onto the curled fingers. *Don't do it!* It's truly insulting. But you will see taxi and tro drivers do it to each other all the time, especially in heavy traffic.

Smoking: Ghanaians hardly smoke tobacco cigarettes, partly because the cost of a packet is equivalent to the average family's daily income so it's prohibitively expensive. There is a general cultural tendency to look down on those who do smoke as being somehow weak or flawed. While smoke from the widespread burning of plastic refuse seems to be tolerated, most Ghanaians detest inhaling another's cigarette smoke. If you do need to smoke, excuse yourself and stand away from gatherings or crowds.

This is Ghana where traditional culture esteems plump, curvy, buxom, big-hipped, round-bottomed, shapely women and heavy-set men.

Meeting and greeting

Ghanaians will spend the first few minutes upon meeting, shaking, asking after the other, then family, health and work, before getting down to the issue. Shaking involves right hands and, after the shake, you click your middle fingers together to make a snapping sound. It takes some practice but it is fun and worth getting the hang of. In fact, I felt incomplete when I traveled in other countries after Ghana and no one snapped.

No one ever responds in the negative and says they are not fine (or I am yet to hear it anyway), even if they're clearly suffering. Ghanaians make the best of it, which appears to keeps things moving and people smiling no matter what.

If you need to approach people to ask for help, first ask, "Hello, how are you?" and wait for a genuine response before asking, rather than walking up and saying, "How do you get to...?!" without first acknowledging the person.

Overall, Ghanaians place great stock in greetings so it's a safe bet to always greet everyone when entering a room or vehicle and always return a greeting, wherever you are—especially when you enter an immigration office to extend your visa. A simple "Hello, how are you?" and a smile should suffice. You'll know very soon that "I'm fine, thank you," is what follows.

"You are fat" or "You have grown fat." This is directed at women and men alike. As I said elsewhere, there is no culture of political correctness and some people simply say exactly what they're thinking.

But let's put it in context. This is not western culture. This is Ghana and the traditional culture esteems plump, curvy, buxom, big-hipped, round-bottomed, shapely women and heavy-set men. This is traditionally because it suggests good health and wealth, which have never been easy to obtain.

Verge Magazine

www.vergemagazine.com

published a story on the reality of starting and sustaining an NGO. There is plenty of wisdom in there:

www.vergemagazine.com/articles/40-departments/118-saving-the-world-101-how-to-start-your-own-ngo.html

So, if someone comes up to you and says “You are fat” or (they know you already and you may have put on some weight thus) “You have grown fat” they are, conversely, complimenting you. It’s not intended as an insult at all. Ghanaians value shapeliness.

What westerners call “pear-shaped” is called “Coca-Cola shape” in Ghana, after the classic glass bottle, and this is the feminine ideal. Men and women will utter the words, “Your Coca Cola shape is wonderful”. Complete strangers have approached me on the street or in the market, patted my hips and exclaimed “plenty, plenty!” So if you’re shapely or larger than average, be prepared for lots of “compliments” and statements about your size and shape and remember where you are. It’s a good thing. In fact, I remember one summer of volunteers where the larger (quite beautiful) girls were receiving a lot of attention and the thin girls who would have been popular in their home country were completely ignored. You could see the confusion as if, “This isn’t right.” Get used to it.

However, due to western influences, young women are now trying to be thin (anorexia is becoming a problem!) and young men are beginning to prefer thinner women. But most still admire and exclaim over shapeliness.

“Obruni”

This Akan word (from which Twi and Fanti are derived) has become synonymous with the idea of “foreigner” and is shouted at you almost everywhere in the south of Ghana. It means “white person” and can understandably annoy non-Ghanaian, African or Asian visitors who get the Obruni treatment as much as any other foreigner. I had one British-African friend with gorgeous braids who was called “Rasta ‘Bruni”. She had a sense of humour about it which is useful in Ghana.

In Tamale and Bolga you’ll be called “Solomia”, in the Volta: “Yevu”, and in Bawku or Hausa speaking areas: “Nasara”. There is no ill intention behind this, Ghanaians are just pointing out

Good intentions are a start, but change occurs through *doing*. So go shake things up!

the obvious as far as they're concerned. It's worth stopping a moment to look at this through Ghanaian eyes—eyes with no deep history of racism (despite the colonial past).

Irony and political correctness are virtually non-existent. Ghanaians generally speak to foreigners without filtering what they say, and with no malice or double-meaning, which can actually be refreshing. Please don't take it personally.

Final Words on the Insider's Guide to Volunteering in Ghana

We explain this in detail in the IGG. However, when you arrive you can catch a taxi outside the airport, from the street (not the guys who hassle you just before you exit and not the ones on the left who hassle you the moment you exit), and travel across Accra for about US\$8. To get to Kumasi on public transport, from the airport, taxi included, should cost about US\$15. To Tamale, about \$25. So when you see volunteer organisations charging over \$3000 a month, airport pick up and drop off included, are they chauffeuring you in private taxis? Are they putting you up in 5-star hotels? If not, there is something amiss with their fees. Try to find an organisation where the greater portion of the fees, if you're paying, go directly towards supporting projects on the ground, not someone living in London or New York.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to everyone who wrote over the past year or so since we began This is Ghana. We checked back and counted 52 emails about volunteering, many with helpful tips and insights from those who completed their project work and had already returned home from Ghana, and quite a few from those soon to depart on their volunteer experience. All those messages prompted this guide and the soon-to-be-released Insider's Guide to Ghana. You can leave any comments, suggestions or whatever you like at: www.g-lish.org. Click on the Volunteering Guide tab to go to the right page. You can email us at gayle@g-lish.org or godwin@g-lish.org. You can follow us on Twitter at [@glishnews](https://twitter.com/glishnews)